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Welcome to EchindaLabs!

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Welcome to EchindaLabs!

by

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Report

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Abstract

Welcome to EchindaLabs!

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Jeff Williams

This Master's Report describes the work, influences, ideas, and research that culminate in my final thesis exhibition at the University of Texas at Austin. I position my practice in an intersection between experimental theater and studio art. Working with time, image, installation, and the roll of the audience, I use one art form to point to the traditions, limitations and conventions of the other. My MFA Thesis work, *Welcome to EchindaLabs!* is a non-linear digital play in the form of a multi-media installation. It exists in the gallery and also as a collection of websites, videos, and ad assets. I discuss my practice of working between studio art and theater, and how I explore narrative content and multi-media form in *Welcome to EchindaLabs!*

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Evolution of Work

I position my practice in an intersection between experimental theater and studio art. I entered graduate school with a dual practice of painting and set design, and my work mines the overlap of forms between these two practices. Working with time, image, installation, and the role of the audience, I use one art form to engage with the traditions, limitations and conventions of the other.

Since I began working seriously as an artist and set designer, it struck me that the same skill set I use in theater and film that is literally disposable – “background” – when applied to painting becomes precious and quite literally objectified. My work at the beginning of graduate school was developed from this relationship of precious/ non precious, seen/ experienced, and permanent/ temporal. I thought of my drawing in terms of theater – temporal, experiential, using topology and sculptural form as well as illusionistic and painterly techniques to engage both the illustrative, made for the eye, and the physical body. I worked with high-quality paper, seeded with both art materials and materials of place—soil, rust, water- that would degrade the paper over time, ultimately creating a “lifespan” for the work. In the way that a stage both creates physical empathy and an imaginary “fourth wall” behind which the audience watches, my large, textural drawings draped into the third dimension, offering a stage-like space that sat somewhere between 2 and 3 dimensions.

Integral to my practice is site and place and the relationship of image to material. In set design, I have been both constrained and inspired by the need to use a certain

location or stage to create an environment. In my painting, I used landscape as an intervention and a collaborator, leaving work in the rain and weather and lacing paper with local soil and natural pigments. This allowed me to carry the collaborative creative process of my set design work into my solo art practice, outsourcing creative decisions to the location itself rather than other people.

Research in the natural sciences has been a cornerstone for my subject matter. I draw from the sciences to create a context of facts or conditions around which social systems are built and individual lives lived. With my 2014 weather series and my city-based work in 2015, I used geography and central Texas weather and water as the starting point for image, material, and process. With *Welcome to EchindaLabs*, I switched my focus from geology to genetics, researching genetic manipulation of viruses as the primary image and metaphor of the work.

My work throughout explores images that exist between dimensional states, contrasting photograph, sign, and illustration with the physical experience of a space in time. *EchindaLabs* is a project is designed to exist across media and arts platforms. It is so far the most successful manifestation of my desire for a shifting art that slides between physical and visual states.

EchindaLabs: Design and Execution

Welcome to EchindaLabs! is a non-linear digital play in the form of a multi-media installation. It exists in the gallery and also as a collection of websites, videos, and ad assets. I use physical and digital tools, creating sets and prosthetic sculptures as well as

digitally manipulated images and videos. This work is made over time and in pieces as a directed collaboration with many other artists, performers, and photographers. Rather than a comprehensive presentation of all of the *EchindaLabs* performances and materials, my gallery presentation is one slice of the imagined world, and active set in which I will perform, record, and film until the end of the show.

Spun off from recent breakthroughs in genetic modification technology, *Welcome to EchindaLabs!* explores virus as a metaphor for physical and social porousness. The story is an accelerationist fantasy of genetic modification that operates on two levels. On one level, *EchindaLabs* offers a variety of products that feature modified viruses to help clients control bodily biomes or wear, manage, and monitor diseases. For example, CherX is a modification to a herpes virus that lets cold sores express as beautiful, flower-like growths, and KnowYourself is a symbiotic fungal infection that allows you to painlessly monitor the state of your cancer or HIV based on growth and color. On another level, *EchindaLabs®* is herself a giant, hive-shaped organism, corporate-as-corporeal mother-monster made of her collective parts, who is slowly growing, learning, becoming.

The recent invention of the easy-to-use, incredibly flexible gene editing technology CRISPR-CAS9 struck me as a watershed moment in human history. When I realized how many scientists at UT were working with it, I wanted to engage. This gene-editing technology is based on ancient viral immune system. The very thing that lets virus infiltrate us – its constant evolution to attack as deeply within our system as possible– has made it the perfect tool to manipulate our DNA. Through research into the new technology and interviews with scientists working at UT Austin, I realized that the

possibilities were so new that no-one is sure yet what can or will happen – politically, scientifically, and socially, we have entered new terrain with this breakthrough. The balance between what we are and what we want to be will determine how much we can change ourselves, which begs the questions – how do we know what we are to begin with? and how do we know what we want to become?

I am interested in the difference between what the news headlines read – DESIGNER BABIES – and what the reality is – years away from substantial human modifications, with many odd discoveries, failures and false-starts along the way. I wanted an image that conveyed the way that news made me feel – that we’re entering a phase where we have to admit our bodies are more porous, more connected, more vulnerable than we in our individual-obsessed society give them credit for, and yet we don’t really know that much about how we work. I use *EchindaLabs®* as a container to explore questions around co-dependence, the possibilities of shaping ourselves, and the paradox of being simultaneously cell and universe.

This story is inspired by a theory that exists in cellular biology, which posits that cells within an organism can act both in their own interest and in the interest of the larger organism of which they are part. My interest in this idea began while I was talking with young scientists working with genetically modified organisms in UT labs. I was struck by the relationship of their own ambitions and ideals to the highly collaborative, often tedious and repetitive lab work they do every day. The young scientists work in labs run by more senior, often well-known scientists. When they talked about the work they did in their lab, their language invariably turned from using “I” to using “we.”

Collaboration has been a major component in my work, something that I have actively questioned and tested in relation to theater and arts practices. Lab work, like theater, is a necessarily collaborative way of working. I use this structure in my story as a way to challenge the myth of lone artist/ genius who is solely credited with their work. Thinking of science as an organism, of bodies as a series of beings, I wanted to scale up as well as down when I thought about choice and interdependence. I began to think about how the structure of science itself is like an organism that has some kind of will, a chain of command, a sense of decision that is streamlined yet de-centered.

EchindaLabs is herself a character, riffing hard on the notion of corporate personhood. What if a corporation could care so deeply for her component members – her clients and employees – that the relationship becomes one of romance and family? What does it mean for corporate entities to form identity and ethics? How can we, in our smaller human scope, get a full picture of the social organisms we compose? What communities of microbes and viruses act within our own bodies every day, forming and motivating us, perceptibly or invisibly? *EchindaLabs* represents my conflated fantasy in which cyberfeminism cross-pollinates neoliberalism in the quest for the ideal, productive, networked community.

I imagine *EchindaLabs* as a company in its first year of growth, trying to develop and find a place for herself as she evolves. The name is borrowed and modified from the Greek goddess Echidna, mother of monsters, who birthed Chimera. In biology, “chimera” is the commonly-used term for transgenic (containing DNA of more than one species) lab animals. EchindaLabs wants something every mother wants – for her children to thrive.

And Echinda has so many kinds of children, with so many kinds of genomes. There is the human hive, her backbone DNA, the cells in the body that make her, the rhizome mind that comprises her identity. There are the cells in their bodies, human and non-human collectives. There are the viruses and the lab creatures and the product lines. What happens in *EchindaLabs* breaks down the roles of mother, lover, child. It remixes progeny and source.

***EchindaLabs* – Design and Execution**

Working from the question, “How can I built a place that is (or contains) a story?” the experience is like a science-fiction “play” that can be enacted by the audience in their own time. The performance aspects of the waiting room use the installation as a temporary set, creating windows of time in which performers activate the space and direct attention and behavior of audience in the space.

This body of work was inspired by reading *When Species Meet* by Donna Haraway, who looks at the myriad ways in which multiple, disparate species shape each other and exchange genetic information over time, and the role of human culture in shaping these genetic outcomes. My inspiration for the form of this work includes *Sleep No More* by the Punchdrunk Theater Company, a staging of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in a building in which acts are continually repeated and the audience can choose their own path through the narrative. I’m also inspired by the hypertext fiction work by Porpentine Charity Heartscape, *With Those We Love Alive*, in which readers are guided through text in a game-like fashion. In the studio arts practices, I’m interested in Omar Fast’s blending

of fiction and documentary, referencing traditional Hollywood narrative conventions while also upsetting their expected outcomes. I am also influenced by Shana Moulton's episodic use of her performance character Cynthia to create a world that revolves around perceived illness and self-discovery, and Mika Rottenberg's films that create a weird economy of jobs specially tailored for the real-life unique bodies that perform them.

Visually, *EchindaLabs* is a space that consists of screens and skins. The photos for ads feature one or two individual models wearing hand-sculpted prosthetics, floating against neutral backdrops. There is a contrast between the fleshy, attractive-grotesque modifications, the models themselves, and the clean white space of the ads and installation. To create the prosthetics I looked for patterns and forms that existed both in sick and atypical bodies and also in floral and fungal growths, seeking an image that split the difference between attraction and revulsion.

The expositional format and overt emotional appeal of advertising made it the ideal visual language to tell a story across platforms. Advertising is also a place where art and social awareness are digested and reflected, where the once-avant-garde goes to be assimilated. Inspired by ads such as the Dove Real Beauty campaign, my ads have an ambivalent relationship to identity-based advertising, such as body-positive advertising and "rainbow-washing," or the use of gay and queer identity to market products. My advertising world queers with the female-oriented world of cosmetic advertising, creating a landscape where queer and lesbian visibility are inexplicably conflated with the hyper-straight visual language of most contemporary advertising. I use the female-oriented advertising to suggest not just a product oriented toward women but also to hint at a

world where maybe men are been phased out and queered as it moves toward the multi-species co-production that EchindaLabs embodies.

I printed large ad images on clear vinyl laminated to windows that can be seen from inside and outside the Visual Art Center. The many ad photographs and videos I created throughout the year are collected in a rolling promotional video. Many of the same images and text are recycled in the website, business cards, and informational flyers that viewers may take from the installation.

The installation operates both in the traditional gallery context as an installation containing image and video and as a set that is periodically activated. The room is intentionally minimal, white, quiet, suggesting a void to be filled by other bodies, to the content alluded to but not overtly described in the ad material. Despite the dearth of explanatory material, the space is still mysterious, lacking in exposition. Audience can look from the waiting room into the empty, white “operating room.” This functions both as a white box/ black box theater and also makes an object of the white-walled gallery itself, to be viewed in a framed and contained way.

Viewers can come through the installation with the typical viewing relationship to artwork; however, I invite both more passive and more active participation. My installation is in a room offset from the VAC, joined only by one door. Benches and quiet music of the waiting room invite viewers to sit down, to perhaps entirely opt out of the art context by looking out the window, conversing, or napping. During office hours, the space is activated with the live performance of a “lab technician” who invites them to sign up for an initial consultation. This conversation is followed up with an email or

appointments can be made by visiting the website. Consultations are one-on-one performances involving a lab technician and a prerecorded script played on headphones, which eventually invite the viewer for a second, follow-up consultation.

The audience/viewer relationship is often determined de facto by the physical space in which the show is held and by some commonly understood boundaries of what an audience is supposed to be. I wanted to create a space that collapsed that distance, that put the audience into the place of the lead character, like a game. In this way, the audience is able to decide how actively they want to participate in the world of the narrative. I wanted to make work shaped like a web, that could easily be entered as a collaborator or a viewer, with the possibility to go deeper toward an unknown center or conclusion. The fact/fiction relationship emerges like a game of telephone, a slide into a non-reality or a collaboratively imagined reality like a game of make-believe.

The physical installation has a mirror and container online at echindalabs.com; it is not an exact record or a documentation, but a translation between mediums that accommodates for different types of user experiences and expectations that come with the physical vs. digital experience. The performance aspects of Waiting Room use the non-temporal physicality of the installation as a temporary set, a window of time in which performers activate the space and direct attention and behavior of audience in the space. The work has translations that are time bound, static, haptic, and digital. By reiterating the language and images of EchindaLab's world, I pass one story through numerous forms to create a varied environment of narrative.

Figures



Figure 1: *CherX Ad Asset*, Digital Image with silicone prosthetic (size variable), 2016



Figure 2: *CherX Ad Asset*, Digital Image with silicone prosthetic (size variable), 2016



Figure 3: *CherX Ad Asset*, Digital Image with silicone prosthetic (size variable), 2016

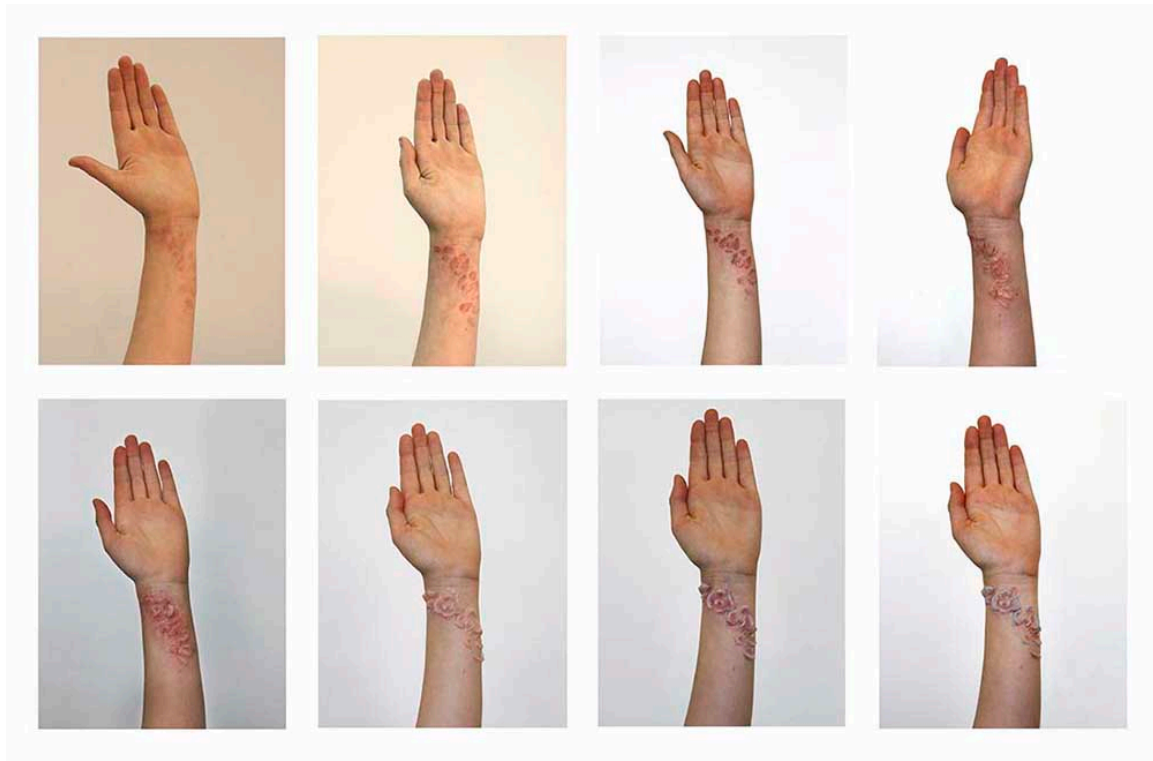


Figure 4: *Arm Evolution Chart*, digital image with silicone prosthetic (size variable), 2016



Figure 5: *CherX Ad Asset*, Digital Image with silicone prosthetic (size variable; still from video), 2016



Figure 6: *KnowYourself Ad Asset: Window Vinyl File*, 8 ½ x 11 inches, 2016



Reliable.
Beautiful.
Alive.

KnowYourself[®]



EchindaLabs.com

Figure 7: *KnowYourself* Ad Asset: *Trifold Brochure (Exterior)*, 8 ½ x 11 inches, 2016

Tired of covering up? Take control!
Love your skin with nDerm.



nDerm

IN Your Skin!™

nDERM gives you the power to permanently shape your chronic acne or eczema into beautiful, unique patterns.

Please visit www.studioderm.com for more information!

What is nDERM?

nDERM gives you the power to permanently shape your chronic acne or eczema into beautiful, unique patterns.

Anyone with chronic acne or eczema knows that these conditions can be expensive and hard to treat, and treatment doesn't always work. In addition to being painful and itchy, living with chronic skin conditions can kill your confidence. Where traditional treatments focus on elimination, nDERM allows you to be uniquely YOU by shaping your skin condition into a beautiful, unique design of your choice.

nDERM is an intelligent microbial process that can be used to shape acne and eczema into beautiful and expressive patterns. Each treatment is custom-designed for the client. The custom nDERM process is applied topically to the skin. Acting like a magnet, nDERM targets the cells that produce unwanted effects, drawing them to the area of the spray. nDERM intelligently rearranges the fabric of the skin into areas of affected and unaffected cells. nDERM is non-invasive, leaves no permanent scars, and results in crisp, beautiful designs.

WHO is nDERM for?
nDERM is for adults (18+) who experience chronic acne or eczema.

IS nDERM permanent?
Yes, the nDERM procedure is permanent and irreversible. If it's possible to change your nDERM design - which is easy to do! Once nDERM is applied the first time, it can be re-designed up to twice a year.*

HOW long does the nDERM procedure take, and when can I get mine?
The nDERM process is a simple, process. In the first month, your certified nDERM provider will assess your specific condition and discuss the size, area, and your desired nDERM design. In the second month you will have a small, localized skin sample taken from which your custom nDERM intelligent microbial process** will be created. Allow for three to four weeks between your second consultation and your final application. The final nDERM application is a simple, easy process that takes less than 30 minutes to finish. nDERM will take two to four weeks after the application to fully express itself on your skin.*




* nDERM results may vary from person to person.
** nDERM EFFECTS: Live within skin effects may include itching, burning, redness, and swelling. May result in localized nerve desensitization or hyper-sensitivity. May increase frequency of exfoliation, redness, and acne breakouts in treated areas, severe skin irritation, bruising, peeling, or increased skin elasticity or "soft spots." In extremely rare cases, regional skin hyperplasia and dermal thinning of skin cells from fatty tissue or hyper-proliferation of new skin cells. May affect genetic heritability.

DOES it hurt?
The initial nDERM application is a completely painless process. Clients may experience itching or burning as the nDERM process takes effect rearranging skin cells. The patented nDERM skin care serum is designed to facilitate the nDERM and ease discomfort.

My acne or eczema outbreaks are itchy and painful. Will it still hurt?
nDERM does not change the nature of your acne or eczema. However, it does make it easier to manage in several ways. nDERM can relocate your affected area to a more comfortable or less visible part of your body, decreasing the potential pain and itchiness. nDERM can concentrate the range of your condition from a wide spread into a more manageable area, decreasing overall discomfort.

In some clients, repeated nDERM design modifications have been associated with decreased nerve sensitivity in the affected area, which can help reduce associated pain and itchiness. Because nDERM does not change the nature of your acne or eczema, topical treatments you used before are still effective.

WHAT kind of design can I get?
That's up to you! nDERM is totally customizable. Express yourself!

Where on my body can I get a nDERM graphic?
Anywhere you like! The nDERM process is faster to take effect when applied near the affected area, but as skin is a total organism the process can work on any area. Relocate and reshape your affliction to any part of skin, in any design! With nDERM, you have complete control.

Figure 8: nDERM Ad Asset, Magazine Spread, 11 x 17 inches, 2016

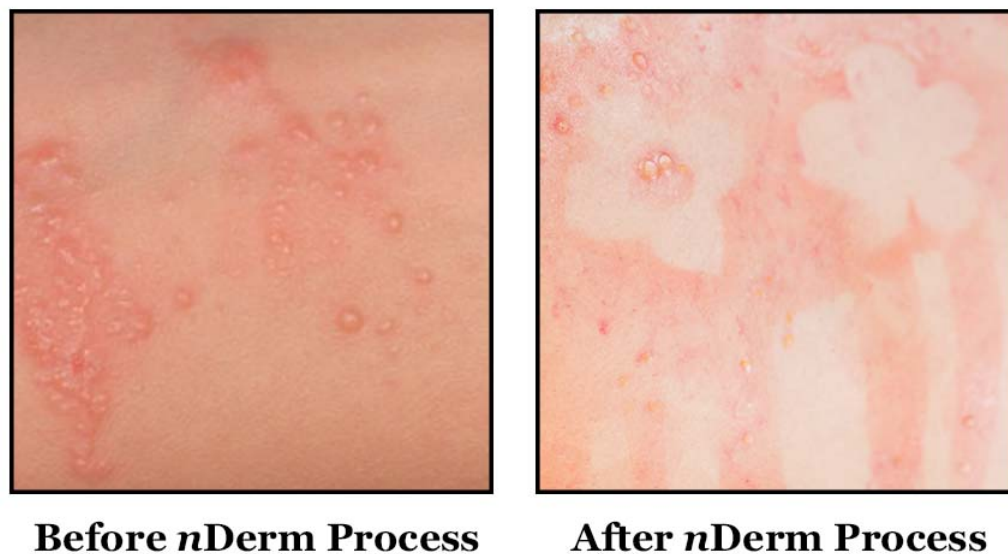


Figure 9: nDERM Ad Asset, Before/After Detail, Digital image and prosthetic makeup, size variable, 2016

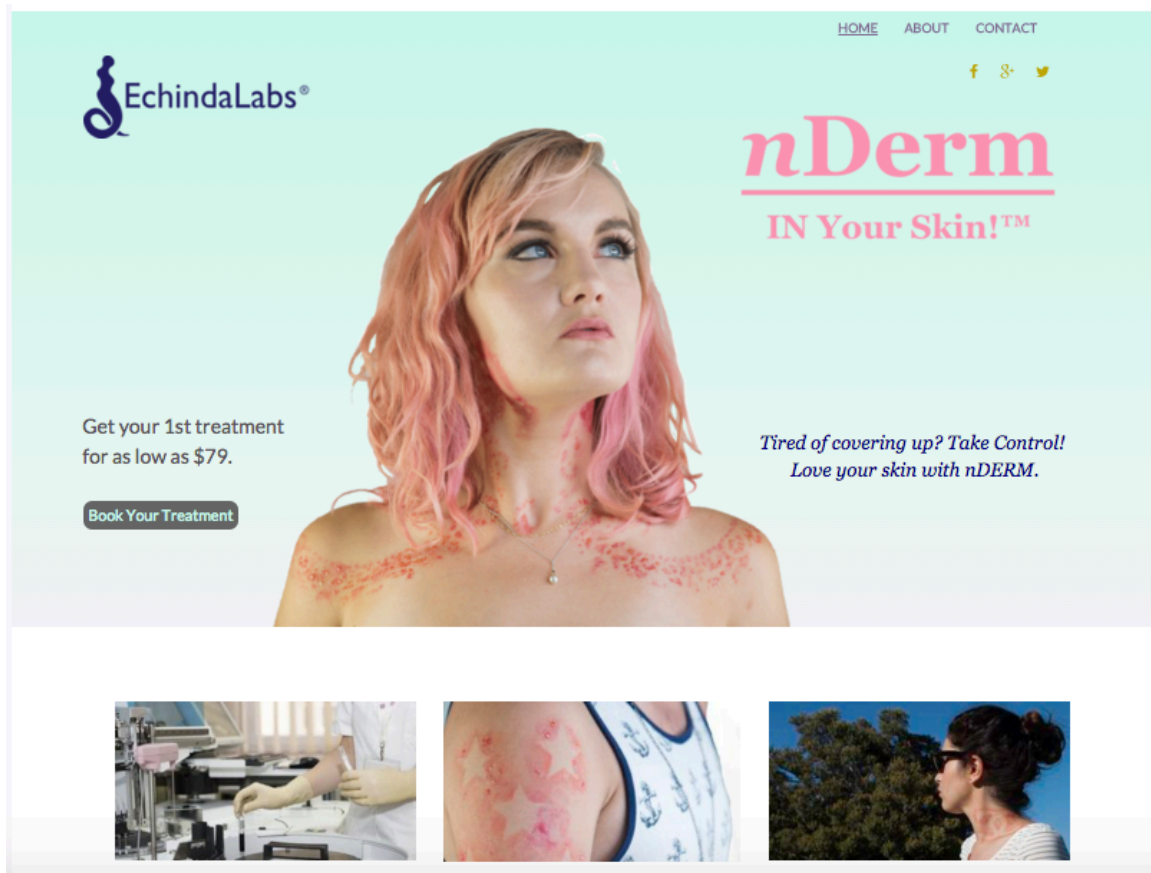


Figure 10: Screenshot from studioDERM.com Home Page, website, size variable, 2016



Figure 11: *Welcome to EchindaLabs! Installation Shot*, Installation (video on monitor, vinyl, furniture, paper promotional goods, live plants), 2016



Figure 12: *Welcome to EchindaLabs! Installation Shot*, Installation (video on monitor, vinyl, furniture, paper promotional goods, live plants), 2016



Figure 13: *Welcome to EchindaLabs! Performance Shot with Lab Technician*, Installation (video on monitor, vinyl, furniture, paper promotional goods, live plants), 2016



Figure 14: *Welcome to EchindaLabs! Installation Shot*, Installation (video on monitor, vinyl, furniture, paper promotional goods, live plants), 2016

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